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# Image Making in the Aftermath of the Digital Revolution

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD



Courtesy the artists and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg

A detail from 'Ponte City' (2008-10) by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse.

## New York

Shows that periodically tell us what the art world is thinking tend to be abused by critics but requited by history.

The International Center of Photography's Triennials have been no exception. "Strangers," for example—ICP's 2003 effort—was disorganized but prescient, noting a merging of public and private life in the post-9/11 era. The growth in the past decade of the surveillance state, of [Facebook](#) "friends" and Twitter "followers," has confirmed the show's prophecy.

ICP's new Triennial, "A Different Kind of Order," is organized around a nebulous frame ("ongoing

political, economic, and technological change") that has the benefit of leaving room for all kinds of still and moving images. The curators—Joanna Lehan, Kristen Lubben, Christopher Phillips and Carol Squiers—have expertly folded works of many shapes and formats into ICP's awkward two-story space. This is the most tightly edited Triennial thus far.

The walls testify to the explosion of image making and sharing in the aftermath of the digital revolution. For artists born after 1980, computers were a birthright rather than a radical upheaval—what television was to babyboomers. Cellphone cameras have been standard issue. Networking through Tumblr or Instagram is a daily ritual. No rules or institutions guide how one should work anymore.

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**A Different Kind of Order: The ICP Triennial**

International Center of Photography

Through Sept. 22

A few patterns are nonetheless visible. Of the 28 artists selected here, the majority are foreign-born. Almost none are blue-chip names represented by photography galleries. The glamour of an MFA from a top art school (Yale, Cal-Arts) has dimmed. Printing in a darkroom

has contracted into an artisanal practice, even as making books on paper has boomed. (ICP has a raised platform for their display.) The big print is passé unless it's made of smaller ones. Video and photography and collage are now used interchangeably.

As humanitarian concerns are in ICP's bloodlines—it was founded in 1974 by Cornell Capa as a haven for engagé photojournalism—work that addresses the planet's distress is commonly at the heart of the Triennial. This one honors those principles.

The peripatetic Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn updates the familiar idea that as technology brings us more news about the world, we may be left more alienated. His video "Touching Reality" (2012) consists of a hand scrolling through an iPad loaded with images, downloaded from the Internet, of anonymous bodies torn apart by war and other acts of political violence.

Stroking fingers may pause to enlarge a picture of a dead man, as if opening a wound, and then scroll quickly past more bashed skulls. Whether our vast access to information increases empathy for suffering in a global village, or whether touch screens only seduce us into believing we are in closer contact with others, is only one of the questions raised by this chilling piece.

The South African photojournalist Gideon Mendel is less successful handling issues of misery. To dramatize the effects of flooding, he has posed people from Nigeria, India, Pakistan, the U.K. and elsewhere in standing water, often in their homes beside their soaked possessions. Color transparencies of his portrait series, called "Drowning World" (2007-), fill the windows that wrap around ICP's street-level facade.

The dire situation of these people, compounded by government neglect, is reflected on their faces. But discomfort with Mr. Mendel, who has asked them to wade into the filthy substance that has ruined their lives so that he can make an obvious point, may also be behind their pained expressions.

Documentary is better represented by two younger Americans. Lucas Foglia's series (2006-10) on idealistic young families in rural Tennessee, Virginia and North Carolina doesn't shy away from the hardships of living on the land apart from society. Michael Schmelling's "The Plan" (2005-09) tunnels into the grungy dwellings of hoarders. The original 500 images, of which this is a sample, were issued on newsprint as a challenge to some art patrons, says Christopher Phillips in the

catalog, "to face down their own obsessive need to collect stuff."

Lisa Oppenheim, in New York, and Andrea Longacre-White, in Los Angeles, are two of the many younger artists mixing digital and analog processes. Ms. Oppenheim's unique prints of clouds refer to Alfred Stieglitz's transcendental "Equivalents." Learning that her images are taken from news archives of oil fires and volcanic eruptions, however, may leave audiences feeling queasy, not ennobled. Ms. Longacre-White transforms images she makes or finds through repeated loopings of scanning, printing and rephotographing. The results are monochrome abstractions that never quite let go of their origins in identifiable real things.

A few artists have fashioned photographs into compelling objects for the wall. The "Diorama Maps" (2003-) by Sohei Nishino of Japan are huge black-and-white photo mosaics, records of his travels on foot around various cities, from Osaka and New York to London and Jerusalem. Personal inventories of urban spaces, they're like a cross between a medieval engraving of a discovered land and a Polaroid mural by David Hockney.

The frenetic collages of Elliott Hundley, a Los Angeles artist, also abjure single-point perspective. To read the tiny, busy type scattered around "Pentheus" (2010), one needs magnifying lenses (helpfully built into the piece), whereas to discern the shadowy nudes looming in the background requires stepping back. Keeping viewers off balance seems to be a pronounced factor in much new photographic work.

"Ponte City" (2008-10) by the South African-English team of Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse represents, floor-by-floor, a 54-story residential skyscraper in Johannesburg, South Africa, that was once the hope of postapartheid society and has now fallen into disrepair. Three towering light boxes of color transparencies offer different perspectives on the structure. One tower features views out of each window; another, of the exterior doors along each corridor; and the last, screen grabs from TVs playing in each apartment. Sumptuous and glowing from afar, the piece is like a three-panel stained-glass window of an ideal community. Only when studied up close do the images reveal that the place is fraying badly from socioeconomic stress.

The most disturbing video in the show may be Rabih Mroué's "Blow Up 4" (2012). A Lebanese artist who lives in Berlin, he noticed a motif while monitoring the war in Syria on the Internet: shaky cellphone videos, by citizen journalists, of gunmen in the streets that abruptly ended as the gunmen became aware of being watched. Trained in theater, Mr. Mroué has slowed down these gripping scenes, with their ambiguous finales, and rearranged them. We watch a tank roll down a street, rotate its gun toward the cameraman, who hides behind a wall.

The images are eerily similar to those of a first-person-shooter video game, except that a cameraman has no weapons to draw against the enemy. The risks of photographing a war, or of witnessing a potential violent act, have seldom been so well delineated. Mr. Mroué also floats the possibility that these scenes may have been staged for release on the Internet. The fate of these gunmen-actors is ultimately unknown.

The spirit of this Triennial is that everything is open to question. That the curators have not let this riotous idea get out of hand is an achievement in itself. Packed with challenging work but not so punishing in scale that it requires multiple visits, "A Different Kind of Order" has identified a high number of promising artists. ICP may one day soon be justifiably proud it has given their work such careful and broadened attention.

*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

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